

Jonathan R. Zatlin vermittelt wichtige Einblicke in den Produktions- und Konsumalltag der DDR. Er arbeitet überzeugend heraus, wie der Umgang des Regimes mit Geld sowohl eine kostenbewusste und Qualität belohnende Produktion verhinderte, als auch die Propaganda des Regimes über den sozialistischen Konsum und die Gleichheit aller in der Praxis unterhöhlte. Allerdings überschätzt er die Bedeutung der Geldtheorie für praktische Entscheidungen. Die SED entwickelte keine wirklich eigenständige Position zur Frage des Geldes. Seine weitergehenden Behauptungen entbehren der Seriosität und stehen im Widerspruch zu dem von ihm Aufgezeigten. Nichts spricht für seine These, die Ostdeutschen hätten langsamere Schritte der Transition vorgezogen und härter über Konditionen verhandelt, wenn sie gewusst hätten, dass die Höhe der Schulden in Wahrheit geringer war (125).

*Stephan Merl, Bielefeld*

Paulina Bren, **The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring**, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press 2010, 264 pp., EUR 17,99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8014-7642-6.

The 'archive euphoria' over the previously inaccessible sources in the now former state-socialist East European countries that followed in the wake of the end of the Cold War has enriched our understanding of contemporary European history with new insights and historical details. New material from the archives has fleshed out the concepts and paradigms developed previously from secondary sources and oral history projects. In some cases, however, the researchers returned frustratingly empty-handed from the archives. In her introduction to "The Greengrocer and His TV", Paulina Bren goes even so far as to compare the archival holdings on her subject – the culture of late communism in Czechoslovakia – to the infamous unsubstantial speeches by the last pre-1989 Czechoslovakian Communist Party Secretary Milouš Jakeš. She finds this absence of *meaningful* words symptomatic of the „nothingness of late communism“, as she calls the period of Czech normalisation (1969–1989):

Normalization's leadership was made up of communism's survivors, the very men who had managed to avoid or overcome the treason trials, purges, arrests, reforms, and counter-reforms of the past twenty years; if they had learned anything by the 1970s, it was that they should leave nothing in writing. Theirs was a world of doublespeak, of endless speeches, with nothing but words piled on like verbal car wrecks. (5f.)

While still pursuing diligent research in several archives, she shifted the focus of her attention to the manifestations of communist ideology and culture policies in popular culture. To this purpose, she adopts Václav Havel's anti-hero of his seminal essay "The

Power of the Powerless”, the greengrocer, the ordinary citizen who transgresses against “living in truth” by his unquestioning performance of the loyalty rituals that seem to be demanded by the Party State. Bren examines another aspect of his life “in lie” (or at least “not in truth”): his presentation in and his relationship with the culture of late communism through the study of television. She chose the highly popular Czech TV serials by Jaroslav Dietl as her core texts. They portray everyday work and family life and were broadcasted from the mid-1970s till the demise of state socialism in 1989, and revived to a great audience success in the 1990s. She also researched the archives of Czech Television, the state and only TV broadcaster. She finds television – and the serials in particular – emblematic of normalisation: television broadcasting was singled out by the communist leaders as the trumpet for their ideological visions in the aftermath of the Prague Spring of 1968. There was a good reason for that: radio and television revealed their potential for mobilising popular political activism and became the tribune of reform communists and, during the Soviet-led invasion in August 1968, a powerful anti-invasion voice.

Bren traces the intellectual context leading to the Prague Spring, including the role played by the media (chapter 1), the Party purges between 1969 and 1970 with a focus on the purges in Czech Television (chapter 2), and the official narrative of the Prague Spring as “public hysteria” and madness (83) exemplified on the crime serial “The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman” (chapter 3). In chapter 4 she outlines the rise of dissent, the key concepts of the *Charter 77* intellectuals and the regime’s anti-Charter campaign, with special attention to the televised Anti-Charter Rally, to which high-profile actors were summoned to demonstrate the entertainment industry’s loyalty to the regime. Bren then outlines the development in Czech Television vis-à-vis communist cultural policies that gave rise to “the cult of the socialist serial” (127) and discusses the early oeuvre and impact of the “normalisation’s narrator”, Jaroslav Dietl (chapters 5 and 6). In the two closing chapters she foregrounds gender as her key concept: in chapter 7 she argues that the private sphere was hoisted into a prominent position within communist ideology during normalisation, and exemplifies her argument on the private sphere in television broadcasting (and in the serials). She advances her argument in chapter 8, linking the family with *controlled* consumption as a model of the ‘socialist way of life’.

Bren weaves her argument from the appeal for “calm and order” (87) issued by the reform communists during the invasion. She follows the trope through communist rhetoric throughout normalisation and observes that it became both programmatic and ideological (89). The “pursuance of quiet life” (*ibid.*) (that is, in contrast to the ‘madness’ of the reform process) became linked to consumerism by the regime, as well as “to new notions about socialist ‘self-realisation’ and what [she] call[s] ‘privatised citizenship’” (111), a concept borrowed from Lauren Berlant,<sup>1</sup> in which “citizenship is turned inward and played out within the family sphere” (149). Television was targeted by the regime as the

1 Cf. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham, N.C. 1997.

vehicle for recruitment of private (as opposed to public) citizens and “the serial about contemporary, everyday life that reproduced social and economic problems on the screen and offered acceptable solutions without having to revert to a genuine public dialogue” (ibid.) as the ideal genre. This line of argument illustrated in the TV serials leads Bren to more general conclusions about the culture of late communism, its “banality” (205), the compliance of citizens with the regime, the identification of citizens with a “quiet life” and “a more qualitative socialist lifestyle” that “made the family its launching pad” (207).

Paulina Bren writes in a reader-friendly style and with a flair that, in her generalisations however, occasionally sweeps a little further than the evidence presented reaches. That is not to say that her deductions are far-fetched, on the contrary, they follow logically from her argument and one sees that they are possible interpretations, they just cover that bit more ground than they solidly rest on. Firstly, she gives Dietl too much credit. Statistics show that the serials were watched by an overwhelming majority of the population. Nevertheless, they still took up only one hour a week of broadcasting time (albeit prime-time) and were surrounded by the context of all the rest of the programming from boring propaganda to the classics of world cinematography. The construction of such a strong connection between the Dietl serials and the whole culture of late communism would thus necessitate a comparative study of popularity of a sample of this other broadcasting and its ties to the contemporary cultural policies. This part of Bren’s argument could have remained ‘smaller’ and still be valid. Her book takes a bird’s eye view on the last twenty years of the communist regime, discerns landmark concepts and constructs connections between them – that in itself presents significant new knowledge. The serials serve as a brilliant case study of this approach even without extrapolating back from them to general societal conclusions.

Secondly, the subtitle of the book heralds “the culture of communism” as the subject. What is left unclear, however, is which understanding of “culture” is being employed: a set of practices within a particular community (such as the manipulation of the public sphere by the power elite) or discourses structuring cultural products (such as the media)? Bren deduces that “[c]itizen viewers not only saw their lives in the story lines; they also identified with the state-approved characters played by state-approved actors” (202). While this is certainly a *possible* statement about normalisation, it refers to reception (that is, practice), but what the reader was offered in “The Greengrocer” was a discussion of discourses and textual representations. The ‘Greengrocers’ are only present at a symbolic level, not as physical socialist citizens. Extending the argument to reception/practice would require research on reception, but that was not a part of the author’s methodology (although Bren did consult letters from viewers in the records of the Czech Television archives, but she rightly notes that those had particular demographics). Her methodology allows her to draw important conclusions about the culture of late communism as a discourse, and about the practices of the Party through its policies. The gist of her argument holds even without the reception part, but it covers a narrower section of “communist culture” than the claim about reception implies.

Among the scholarly discussions that followed the demise of state socialism, those on the relevance of feminism and gender analysis in East European societies were lively and prominent – especially among Czech feminist scholars. Although Bren draws on a limited sample of these, gender is an important concept for her. She argues that the privatisation of citizenship and the key place of the family and the private sphere in the culture of late communism meant that „women were central to the communist project“ (207). It is a stimulating conclusion, but one that calls for further reflection: does it refer to the discourse of communist power or to everyday practice? The author’s argument would also gain yet another dimension if, apart from using gender in reference to the role assigned to women by the regime, she used it also as an analytical category. For example, what are the implications of the gendered pronoun in the book’s subtitle – the greengrocer is clearly a ‘he’, because it is *his* TV? This prompts questions such as, who were the orchestrators of Czech Television broadcasting, what were their speaking positions, ‘interpellations’, in terms of gender? What kind of gender order is conceptualised by Czech Television’s programming?

Paulina Bren notes that the importance of the private sphere as a refuge from the regime actually played into the hands of the ideology of late communism (173), but it would again add weight to her argument if she took the step to interrogate the traditional gender roles and the division of spheres perpetuated both by the regime and in the dissent. It would enable her to observe that the regime actually did not challenge traditional gender roles, but merely shifted emphasis it gave to the private sphere. Women in the normalisation TV serials accrued power for themselves largely by over-extending, not subverting, femininity.

A closer gender analysis would also help Bren to see beyond the widespread myth of women being “sent out of the kitchen and into the workplace” (175) in the 1950s, while in reality the ratio of economically active women in 1950 was roughly the same as in 1930 and then grew *gradually* over the following decades.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the ‘myth’ is rather class specific, concerning middle-class women.

Reservations aside, “The Greengrocer and His TV” makes an important contribution to the so far little-trodden ground of the discourse of late communism. It will be relevant for students and educated public interested in contemporary European history and in gender and media studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vladimír Srb, 1000 let obyvatelstva českých zemí [1,000 Years of the Population of the Czech Lands], Praha 2004.